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Head

Fa woke up in the morning to find her son Syu's head missing.

She poked a long laundry pole around under the bed and into the cracks in the wall, searched the drawers one by one, and opened the tins of KK cream cookies and chocolate sandwich crackers in the cupboard one by one (Syu once said the brand tasted good), but Syu's head was nowhere to be found.

The morning sunshine was warm and felt like a lively flea creeping into your collar. People were drinking bottled beverages (with unintelligible ingredients) and gulping down instant noodles and dried and preserved dim sum (with 'freshness guaranteed') as usual, ready to repeat the previous day's busyness or idleness. At this point someone drew up the curtain, looked casually out of the window and saw the headless Syu, accompanied by his parents, being taken away in an ambulance. The onlooker yawned again as the ambulance turned clumsily into the dusty road.

'Please take him away.'

Without looking at Syu, the insomniac doctor just shook his head, as if mourning himself. His eyes sunk deep into their sockets, he looked at Syu's parents and said, 'Now there's nothing we can do but wait for the police to find his head.'

His swollen eyes seemed to add weight to his words. The melancholy doctor put his hands in his pockets and walked away with his shoulders hunched forward. The hospital was bustling with metallic beds and wheelchairs, many of which were occupied by patients who had lost their nose, heart, limbs or other organs. They had big eye bags and a sallow face and except for their outfit looked no different from the doctors. The white synthetic fabric rushing past you and the noisiness soaked with the smell of disinfectant combined to create a strange festive atmosphere. Under the sway of such an atmosphere Fa, facing the headless Syu, began to cry. Syu's father Muk stayed silent throughout. But before the doctor in white gown disappeared at the far end of the long corridor, Muk had made up his mind - he would give his head to his 25-year-old only son.

The doctor looked briefly at Muk, lifted his eyelids slightly and gave a tired smile, 'The law in this country says you may, if you wish, donate any of your organs to your next of kin.'

Muk's decision was none too surprising. Some said this was hinted by earlier episodes in the father-son relationship. Others disagreed.

Syu was born at 11:05 pm on 13 November 1977.

When the long wait was suddenly fulfilled, the first sight of his son left Muk at a loss.

'Looks just like me.'

Standing in an empty corridor outside the newborn nursery, his forefinger in his mouth, Muk pressed his face against the glass window and looked at his son for a long time.

No one knows how Muk could possibly see his own image in the fiercely crying Syu.

Syu was a crier. An old neighbour could still remember how the thin and weak Muk would carry his crying newborn son on his back and run along the river embankment near his home night after night. The crying of his son would heave to Muk's shoulders as he ran past. Muk would be back later, breathing heavily. As the river bank saunterers were all gradually gone, the long, thin figure of Muk would remind one of some sort of stellar body orbiting along a fixed route.

In the middle of the night the sleep-deprived neighbour would ring the doorbell.
'My son's caught a cold and can't breathe properly.'

The worried Muk bent over close to his son and stuck out his lips to suck the shiny, slimy mucus out of his son's nose. Engrossed by the sweet expression on Muk's face, the neighbour forgot about his lack of sleep and thought of a street hawker selling maltose candy on a holiday.

Want a maltose candy, Syu?

The little old man selling maltose candy at the pedestrian tunnel entrance looked familiar. He would sometimes appear on television variety shows.

Syu was so excited to hold in his hand a maltose candy on a stick that he let out a happy scream. Whenever Syu got excited, his fingers would clutch tightly at his father's nose, which consequently became scarred from scratches. He said to Fa: the kid is obsessed with my nose rather than with my eyes or mouth.

The head transplant operation was successful. On a chosen date most auspicious for housecleaning, logging and catching, Fa took father and son home. But not before Fa had changed the colour of the curtains and symbolically hung ox bones, cypress leaves and chicken feathers on the main door and windows. Fa did not know the meaning of these acts but was probably just hoping that, among illusions of making a new life, life would be the same as before.

Muk's headless body would do an exercise routine on the balcony every morning as before, so it must have been Syu who ran to catch a bus wearing a shirt in the morning and came home with cakes and beers in the evening. These observations were made by neighbours who had nothing better to do. They would congregate under a shady shelter in the park to engage in long meaningless debates, and then would forget everything before the sun set. Fa walked past them deliberately on several occasions, and they just feigned innocence. Fa knew very well what they had been talking about, but still she was slightly saddened that she had been shut out.

Actually Fa would not mind sharing details about the lives of Muk and Syu. Indeed this community was woven together by whispered conversations between neighbours, and Fa had always been actively involved in this sort of communication.

Fa and Muk were now very much together. Without a head, Muk no longer worked at the bookshop he had run for years. Muk would sometimes stumble around the home, bumping into a vase or a fish bowl and leaving a dying, struggling fish on the floor. But he would spend most of the time sitting lazily on the swing on the balcony, scratching an itch with his long thin fingers.

Syu took over the bookshop from his father, but he never forgot to squat beside his father every day to give him an injection of nutrients prescribed by the doctor.

The sun, warm as before, shone generously on Muk. Fa did not know whether it was some hidden memory or physical energy that was in command of this body, but then well it's not just such a small, insignificant matter that we don't know. Such a sunny day, Fa thought. Better take out the cotton blankets to wash and dry on the roof.

This swing Muk was sitting on had a rattan seat. Muk bought it when Syu was fourteen months old. Before Muk put Syu on the swing for the first time, it seemed to the child just another toy car or some ringing toy telephone.

But as soon as his buttocks contacted the rattan seat, Syu started to scream just as he would at every new discovery. Then Syu began to bite his nails absent-mindedly. He had not expected his father to suddenly give him a hard push that sent the swing high up into the air as if it would land in the river. It was only then that Syu became frightened, held on tight, hunched forward and looked helplessly at his father. Smiling, Muk happily took out a painting and showed it to his son. Syu gave his father a puzzled look, all the time alert that he might again swing high up into the air.

It could be said that Syu's early learning actually took place on the swing. Against the background sounds of the creaking rattan seat, Muk would show his son the 54 paintings he produced between the ages of seven and fifteen. In his analysis Muk would emphasize especially the differences in term of composition, colour and thought. He would also encourage Syu to look closely at the paintings and even touch them. But this mode of learning was brought to a close before Muk had time to turn to his paintings produced after the age of 15 during a creative period he called 'Wild Rats'.

Syu's days of happiness seemed to have disappeared ever since he grew strong enough to jump down from the rattan seat.

Hiding in the cupboard, Syu could see through a chink that his father was looking anxiously for him. His hands resting on the rattan seat, a disappointed Muk stood alone in the sun and threw a dark grey shadow on the shiny balcony floor.

Now the swinging rattan seat was creaking again. Watching Syu give his father an injection of nutrients, stand up and turn to face her, Fa felt as if the old days were coming back again.

Today Syu was wearing a yellow shirt, a mustard coloured tie and a pair of brownish trousers. Fa remembered Muk once saying 'Yellow means good luck'.

Syu had a date with Dau today. He had been going out with her many times since his operation.

Just as with any other irreversible change, Dau reacted none too strongly to Syu's changing his head. Admittedly, she was a bit discouraged by the loose skin and dark spots on the face that had belonged to Muk, but she was by nature an open-minded person and before long came to accept the fact that Syu had a new head.

After all, it was not uninteresting to find an unfamiliar mind in a familiar body. Dau naturally started again to date, communicate and establish body contact with Syu. In the process Dau made a major discovery: Syu now had dull eyes, was often quiet and would occasionally recite lines of poetry to himself in a murmur.

It's summer. Shouldn't we be together, dead on the tree - the male protagonist on the big screen was saying, with his eyes fixed on a cicada. Eating up the popcorn, Dau yawned again. At this point Syu proposed to Dau. She received a portrait of Muk as a gift.

Her arms wrapped around the portrait, the still sleepy Dau sat in an empty underground carriage, watching the overhead ring-shaped handgrips swinging. Just before the long school holiday began, Dau had lost interest in travel, reading and collecting glass bottles. Before long Dau became tired of everything in her bedroom - the dull shape of the bed was especially unbearable. Ditch everything and start afresh? Too much trouble. It's not such a bad idea, Dau thought, to get interested in marriage. And before marriage Dau had another idea.

With a sharp pair of scissors Dau cut out Syu's head from each of their photographs and substituted Muk's head - there were plenty of heads to use from a big pile of his photographs Dau had acquired from Fa.

Dau would sometimes remember with relish the paper dolls she possessed as a kid. She enjoyed severing the heads from the bodies clad only in underwear, rearranging the heads and bodies and putting them together again with adhesive tape. Watching Syu in his present form would sometimes remind Dau of this game. In both cases the fun would come from the unfamiliar feeling brought about by the cutting and juxtaposition.

When Syu acquired and enjoyed showing off the abilities to walk and run, Muk started dreaming about his son getting far away from him in different ways. At first Syu would float away on a boat or balloon and Muk would chase as hard as he could. Later Syu would go into the crowd and suddenly everyone would lose their face so Muk could not possibly identify him. Finally Muk would find himself holding in his hands a plate full of water - he could possess only Syu's reflection in the water and inevitably the reflection would be evaporated, drop by drop, by the deadly hot sun.

The symbolic meaning of these dreams did not go ignored and Muk started to tell elaborate lies to Syu: 'Everywhere in the city flower pots and TV sets will suddenly fall from high above', 'There are more and more murders in the streets', 'Every day 8723 people die violent deaths and ninety per cent are children under seven'. Muk would even use photographs of dead bodies to prove his point. After dark, Muk would stand behind Syu and whisper into his ear, 'There's a ghost behind every lamp-post, post box and door you see.' Later even Muk himself became convinced that crisis was everywhere in this world.

Gradually Muk began to hallucinate and hear voices. He had nightmares and was afraid of being alone.

Later Muk would put lead weights in his son's shoes to make him walk with difficulty. The sweaty son would look to the father for help. Muk would then gently lift and carry Syu. By now Syu felt as heavy as a submarine to Muk.

In 1974 Muk opened a bookshop in an area with the highest crime rate in the city.

The bookshop was located on the first floor and sold porn books and magazines just like other shops in the mall.

The bookshop had a colour photocopier. Every day Muk would use the machine to make photocopies of his paintings and put them between the pages of the porn books and magazines. Most customers would throw away these photocopies even before leaving the mall. Some would use the photocopies to steady a wobbly chair leg, to record the telephone number of a takeaway, or to bookmark a particularly exciting page in a book or magazine.

Muk's bookshop was the only place in the mall where the lights were never on. A patch of faint grey sunlight would move across the floor during the day. Hesitant customers coming into the bookshop would often be surprised to find Muk painting in a dark corner. Now customers would find Syu instead of Muk but except for his much bigger build Syu looked no different from Muk.

The colourful deformed human figures painted all over the floor, ceiling and walls in this mouldy bookshop were carefully crafted by Muk. A badminton player, for example, had breasts where the limbs should be, and limbs where the breasts should be. Twins with two heads growing out of a single body sat in a bath. A face appeared again and again in these human figures. It was now hard to tell which was Muk and which was Syu.

At exactly a quarter past one in the afternoon Fa would arrive at the bookshop with a packed lunch for her son. Fa was now accustomed to seeing a smile bloom on the deeply wrinkled face of her 25-year-old son upon her arrival. She would also find herself utterly unable to recall her son's original face.

The son has come into the father's inheritance - you should be happy. Fa would later say to Muk as he lay silently beside her.

One day Muk suddenly realized that Syu was gradually getting far away from him in a way he had not expected.

With the easel set up, Muk wrapped his hand around Syu's hand and began to teach him how to apply the diluted watercolour to the paper. But just then Syu shook Muk's hand off his and ran swiftly to the football field.

Muk stood in front of the football field and stopped there. It astonished Muk to see his son entering what was supposed to be a world made up of painted surfaces of varying shades of green.

Muk noticed that since starting school Syu had slowly begun to think like everyone else and enter their world. Gradually Syu came to disbelieve his father. The lead weights in his shoes were taken away during school uniform inspection. After which he began frequently to play football with other kids in the sun.

Muk stood in front of Syu's school. His face pressed against the wire mesh, he could see kids chasing after a white object. Muk felt as if his head, though resting on his neck, was being kicked around too.

Muk saw a strong, powerfully built man. Muk banged on the wire mesh and motioned the man to come over. Muk asked the man to bring Syu to him. The man shook his head, saying, 'Sorry, we're having a PE lesson.'

Frustrated, Muk crouched down in front of the wire mesh and watched helplessly as his son was trapped behind the wire mesh. Muk crouched there for a long time until his body began to melt in the sun and became smaller and smaller.

Without a head, Muk looked even thinner and weaker than before, lying silently on the bed like a dull coloured tea tray.

Leaning back on the bed, the bored Fa was eating roasted melon seeds and casually throwing the shells onto Muk's sunken stomach. She talked about an elderly lady, Mrs Ma, who recently hired an hourly-paid helper, and whose eyebrowless husband was a hawker of fake designer bags in the centre of the city.

'You can tell the real from the fake only by the sound you make on the bag with a flick of the fingers. Only seasoned customers know the trick.'

Fa glanced at Muk and was glad that now he could not frown and leave before she had even started to talk about the main subject.

Fa's throat was dry from eating the melon seeds, so she passed the shells from Muk's stomach to the palm of her hand and picked out with the fingertips those shells stuck in his skin folds. Fa just wanted to keep Muk as neat and tidy as any piece of the furniture in the home but her exploits produced an erotic effect she had not expected.

As she was about to leave, Fa could feel a thin hand slipping silently around her waist, followed by fingers gliding smoothly across her body to find the secret spot.

Even without a head Muk had a strong sexual urge and Fa was slightly surprised by his unprecedented bold moves. Again and again Fa pushed Muk to the ground but suddenly changed her mind and decided to put his body on the bed.

On this sweaty summer afternoon, Fa felt, Muk's body helped her remember those long gone days when the curtains in the room were still dark green, when she would often dream of a willow tree growing out of her stomach, and when Syu had not been born yet.

When Fa was pregnant, Muk would often ask her to sit naked in a chair as a model for him. At that time Fa would pose enthusiastically for Muk in the belief that he was obsessed with her naked pregnant body. Later she discovered this was not the case.

Fa could find in Muk's sketches not her own image but rather a bulging belly in which the body of the baby was clearly visible. Muk made such a sketch every week and the sketches showed clearly the subtle differences. Looking at these sketches, Fa could almost believe that Syu was formed in exactly the same way.

Fa soon lost interest in being a model for her husband. Sitting in a chair, Fa would ramble on about every happening in the neighbourhood that ever reached her ears. Indeed this was what marriage was for. She must recognize her existence in her rambling storytelling. When Muk began to find this unbearable, Fa turned to her neighbours and all the details about her marriage life became important assets for her friendships with her neighbours.

Later Fa was relieved of her task and Muk began to sketch his son all by himself.

'The baby is not yet born. Who are you sketching?' Fa, with pickles in her mouth, could not help asking.

Smiling, Muk took out a photograph of himself and said, 'I'll just sketch from this picture. The baby will look just like me.'

Syu, who was growing taller and bigger, did not look like his father at all, they said, especially because Muk was getting thinner and thinner with protruding cheekbones and a pale face like a seriously ill patient. Surprisingly, Muk later not only accepted this view but even firmly denied that Syu was his son. Muk could provide neither explanation nor evidence beyond his insistent claim: 'You're not my son. Don't you pretend to be my son.'

When he said this, his eyes were fixed on a portrait of two people who looked very much like Muk. They looked like twins but Muk insisted that this was a portrait of himself and his son Syu. All day long Muk was looking at the portrait, which he had hung on the wall opposite the bed, and as he did so he would suddenly smile or become tearful.

'Looking at the portrait won't get you another son,' Fa said.

These words dumbfounded Muk. Another son. Indeed why not? If only I could have another son. Perhaps I could have another son. Muk's gaze passed over the ageing Fa and fell on Dau.

'Hello,' Dau said to Syu's father.

It was only after Syu had taken Dau home to meet his father several times that Muk began to notice her existence. Muk served Dau a big bowl of grapes himself and watched as she took the large round grapes off the stems, remove the skins and put the flesh in her mouth. At this point Muk could see that Dau had a bulging belly in which a baby boy was gradually taking shape.

'Looks just like me,' Muk smiled, with his forefinger in his mouth.

As soon as Dau left, the overjoyed Muk asked childishly: 'When's the baby due?'

'What baby?' Syu said, 'I've never wanted babies. Not even one.'

A week before the wedding Syu gave Dau a big box of porn magazines. Later he also took Dau to see all sorts of porn films. Day after day they would go to a porn cinema to see a film in the morning, have lunch, see another film, have dinner and see another film.

Apart from the dispensable plot and the almost changeless props and costumes, Dau could see little else on the screen other than certain repetitive acts and sounds. Syu had an absorbed and serious expression on his face whereas Dau would keep yawning and then soon fall asleep.

'I thought this would whet your appetite for sex,' Syu said dejectedly when Dau finally woke up.

'Why would you want to whet my appetite so urgently?' Dau asked, rubbing her eyes.

'I can have a son only if I do that thing with my wife. And you're going to be my wife soon.'

Dau was somewhat surprised by Syu's instrumental view. She had been doing that thing for a long time but had never thought it could have any significance or consequence. Dau thought of pregnancy - a process that would make the body change according to a certain rhythm without any deliberate planning. On that thought, she suddenly felt a sense of resigned calmness.

The day before the wedding Dau and Syu had sex in a very good mood.

Later Dau told Syu that he had performed the act briskly without pausing over the unnecessary details. Syu thanked her for the compliment and asked her to model for him. Dau shrugged her shoulders and lay down on the bed. She was disappointed to notice that Muk's bed had the same dull shape as hers.

A creaking sound wafted from the balcony, where the swing was swinging wildly to and fro and sending Fa and a headless body high up into the blue cloudless sky again and again.

The night before Syu's head went missing, someone said, father and son could be seen on the river bank.

'It's getting late. What's fun to do around here?'

Muk took out a saw from his backpack: 'People in the city have long lost their adventurous spirit. Let's play a new game.'

Syu, who enjoyed trying out exciting ideas, perked up: 'Sounds interesting. What game shall we play?'

‘We will each take our head off and give it to the other to hide in a secret place. The one who first finds the hidden head wins.’

Syu took his watch off his wrist enthusiastically and threw it to his father: ‘Let me start first. Keep time. Don’t cheat!’

The tired Muk nodded emphatically.

Syu took his head off without too much effort. As soon as his son’s head fell on the ground, Muk picked it up and ran away.

‘That night Muk ran for a long long time. His limbs were tired when he woke up the next morning.’

Those who heard this story did not believe it.

When both Fa and Dau became pregnant, the whole family decided to move home.

Early in the morning, with the help of a removal man Syu put the last carton on the truck. Bare above the waist, Syu could boast a big strong body but no one noticed that Muk’s head had changed visibly on this body – the wrinkles and dark spots had imperceptibly disappeared and the skin had become supple and glowing again. One was reminded of some innovative grafting method: the slightly rosy head of Syu (Muk?) was blooming in the sun.

Fa and Dau, each with a bulging belly, also seemed flourishing. Sitting in the front of the truck, Fa did not feel particularly unreluctant to leave the community she had long lived in. Nor did she feel in any way expectant. Well, you can always start everything in the same way, Fa thought.

Leaning on Fa’s lap, Dau was still taking a nap. Dau was utterly uninterested in moving. Her only thought was: ‘Get a round-shaped bed, the sort you often see in a love hotel.’ The removal men mistook Muk for a peculiar piece of furniture and put him alongside other miscellaneous items in the back of the truck. When the truck started, pedestrians could see through the open rear doors a headless body sitting on a rocking swing and scratching an itch with its long thin fingers.

Muk was born at 3:40 pm on 14 August 1952.

Muk had always thought that people existed for the sake of being observed and transformed into patches of colour; he had therefore never thought it necessary to talk to and establish a relationship with other people. In some secret corners of his self Muk would unfold himself and the world on a piece of paper in various ways, because only by doing so could he feel and understand everything he saw.

It was only later when Muk knew a bit of human anatomy and decided to have a son that he modified his view. He began to have sex with different women but this brought about all sorts of unanticipated consequences. In an empty music classroom Muk got slapped and bitten by a strongly built female student. Later on his way to school Muk got beaten up by a woman’s husband. Despite various setbacks Muk continued to search for ways to achieve his goal. Realizing that in this city the best protection for the pursuit of sex was to be found in the privacy of home and marriage, Muk dedicated efforts in this direction.

Later when his son was gradually taking shape inside Fa’s belly, Muk put his ear close to the skin of her belly, listened carefully and with Fa’s encouragement touched it lightly with his fingers. Only then did Muk find that with his senses of sound and touch he had felt for the first time the real, which was even more real than the self he saw in the mirror.

Translated from the Chinese by Yau Wai-ping